

## Book Review

### *The Prudence of Love: How Possessing the Virtue of Love Benefits the Lover*

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Review by Robyn Gaier

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*The Prudence of Love: How Possessing the Virtue of Love Benefits the Lover*

Eric J. Silverman

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The book *The Prudence of Love: How Possessing the Virtue of Love Benefits the Lover* by Eric J. Silverman is a well-written and engaging work that furthers the discussion about what it means to regard love as a virtue. *Prima facie* it may seem odd to speak about *possessing* the virtue of love since that entails that “love” is a noun rather than a verb. Since “love” is typically used as a verb, perhaps some clarification here is in order. Treating “love” as a noun does not negate its active role. So, for instance, when Silverman defines love in a Neo-Thomistic way as “a disposition towards relationally appropriate acts of the will consisting of disinterested desires for the good of the beloved and desires for unity with the beloved, held as final ends” (19), he bridges the gap in these two senses of the word “love.” Having a loving disposition and, hence, possessing the virtue of love, necessarily manifests itself in relationally appropriate *acts* according to Silverman.

It also may be initially puzzling to think that a loving disposition should benefit the lover, or that such benefits acquired through possessing a loving disposition should count in favor of seeking the virtue of love. Silverman is clear that his project “examines the benefits of love from the detached third-person perspective” and that, from this perspective, insights may be gained “into the nature of love and the source of love’s value” (5). So, it is not as if Silverman is seeking the motivational reasons as to why someone ought to care about developing the virtue of love but, rather, that the benefits of a loving disposition lack specificity in the relevant literature. Although it is often taken for granted that possessing the virtue of love is beneficial to the lover, exactly why this is so is less than clear. Silverman’s project, therefore, advances this ongoing discussion with careful reflection not only about the nature of love but also about well-being and the connections among love, well-being, and what it means to live an ethical life.

Silverman claims that the benefits of love he envisions are compatible with the three most popular theories of well-being: hedonism, desire-fulfillment, and an objective list account of well-being. Hence, Silverman’s project has the advantage of being able to accommodate different accounts of what constitutes one’s well-being, and proceeds to argue how love may benefit the lover regardless of the theory of well-being assumed. Specifically, Silverman claims that there are five distinct ways in which someone possessing the virtue of love derives benefit. These five benefits, according to Silverman are that “love provides final ends that motivate enjoyable and beneficial activities, brings about psychic integration, motivates self-improvement, increases the lover’s epistemic goods, and makes relationships more harmonious, enjoyable, and tenacious” (93). Silverman then addresses some potential problems, or objections, that others might have with his Neo-Thomistic account of love. For instance, he addresses concerns about the proper objects of love and whether unloving or apathetic agents may derive the benefits he associates with possessing the virtue of love.

There are several complexities, however, with respect to understanding “the nature of love and the source of love’s value” (5). Although Silverman acknowledges such complexities, more than an acknowledgement is warranted to understand love’s nature and source of value. For example, love can be manifested in a variety of relationships within distinct domains including self-love, interpersonal love, and even impartial love (as in philanthropy). It is clear that Silverman focuses upon the virtue of love as it is manifested in interpersonal relationships – particularly close

interpersonal relations, such as family and friends. It is less clear, however, why this is so. Given Silverman's definition of love and his acknowledgement of self-love, according to his definition (75) it seems as though possessing love as a virtue should be fundamentally regarded as manifesting itself in terms of self-love rather than in terms of the potential for loving interpersonal relationships. There are at least two main reasons in support of the need for greater attention to self-love within Silverman's project.

First, it might provide a better way for addressing the criticism that arises from love that becomes lost. An agent can only benefit from love manifested in an interpersonal relationship so long as the other person is alive and wills to be in the particular loving relationship. Consider, for instance, the emotional, psychological, and spiritual pain of grief. When one's beloved passes away, grief may become unsurmountable. It is hardly a benefit or comfort for the lover to appreciate and to reflect upon what *once was* (138). Silverman hypothesizes, however, that the "overall benefits of the virtue of love" throughout one's lifetime are "likely to outweigh the pain" of, say, a parent losing her child (139). But Silverman does not give support for his hypothesis and, in any event, there is no guarantee that the overall benefits of the virtue of love *will* outweigh one's pain. To avoid such a scale, it might be helpful to think about the virtue of love not as essentially rooted in interpersonal relationships but, rather, as essentially rooted in self-love. The difficulty with grounding the virtue of love as essentially manifesting itself in interpersonal relations seems evident in the following passage. Silverman writes:

[t]he person with the full virtue of love is better off than one with a single loving relationship that provides a small number of final ends that might be lost. Death can eliminate the possibility of achieving the final ends associated with any particular relationship, thus preventing those ends from providing meaningful activity. Furthermore, any particular relationship may fail for reasons outside of the individual's control. If a person only has final ends from a single loving relationship, losing it can empty an entire life of meaning. In contrast, a loving person has many relationships that provide final ends including those with parents, children, spouses, friends, neighbors, co-workers, members of a shared faith, and fellow citizens (105).

Silverman's understanding of loving interpersonal relationships is, therefore, an ideal. A loving person will have an array of loving interpersonal relationships. But, because such many and varied loving interpersonal relationships are, at least in part, beyond the individual's control, the benefits derived through the manifestation of the virtue of love in interpersonal relationships simply cannot be assured to the lover.

The second related reason for favoring an account of the virtue of love as manifested with a focus upon self-love rather than upon interpersonal relationships is that it neither alters nor loses any of the five benefits of love that Silverman notes. In fact, as I claim above, there might be ways in which self-love more accurately secures benefits for the lover simply by not making these benefits depend upon factors beyond the individual's control. Self-love, when understood in terms of the Neo-Thomistic account of love, is understood as desiring both one's ultimate good as well as one's psychic integration. Both desires still involve risks to the agent. Nevertheless, self-love may be a more promising path to take when trying to address the above worry –namely whether all of the lover's benefits are lost with the passing of a beloved. Or, perhaps more pointedly, whether it is possible that the pain of the passing of one's beloved outweighs the benefits that were had in the relationship.

Finally, perhaps more careful transitions between love as a noun and love as a verb would enhance Silverman's project. For instance, Silverman writes "one distinct benefit of the reciprocal relationships love engenders is that they give the lover access to epistemic goods that are only available in such relationships" (128). Silverman is drawing attention to a benefit uniquely derived through reciprocal relationships. But his overall project is to discern how possessing the virtue of love benefits the lover, and there is a difference between possessing a virtuous disposition and participating in a reciprocal relationship that one could not possibly possess. Hence to acknowledge benefits of potential, or even likely, relationships of someone with a virtuous disposition is to acknowledge only potential, or even likely, benefits. Nevertheless, acknowledging likely benefits does not undermine Silverman's project, which succeeds in furthering the discussion about the nature and value of love. Indeed, *The Prudence of Love* is a timely and clear work that

should be of interest to those wishing to deepen their understanding of both the philosophical and psychological underpinnings regarding the nature and value of love.

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